TRUE RELIGION
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This Wednesday, November 11th, is Veteran's Day. It used to be called Armistice Day, because on the 11th day of the 11th month - at 11:00 A.M., in the year 1918 an Armistice was signed at Versailles which brought to an end a great and unprecedented conflict we know as the First World War. It was modern warfare and it stunned the world with its ferocity and mechanized violence and unthinkable loss of life. It was, the American President said, "a war to make the world safe for democracy," a "war to end all war." It was called Armistice Day until we fought several more wars, and then we renamed it Veteran's Day. As we observe it this year, young Americans are again fighting and dying, giving all they have for our country. Flags will be flying at half mast and it will be even more poignant this year because of the deaths of thirteen young American women and men last week, on American soil, their own base, Fort Hood.

Armistice Day was a school holiday. There was a parade and in the parade were aging veterans of that war that ended in 1918, with their peculiar uniforms, knickers, and field hats. At precisely 11:00 the most dramatic thing happened. The parade stopped. The bands and drums ceased playing and an unusual and holy silence descended. People standing to watch the parade stopped talking and cheering and hushed their children. Men removed their hats. Everyone bowed their heads.

And into that peculiar November silence, a lone trumpeter from each band played taps. We thought about those who had gone to France, Flanders' Field and had not come home. We thought, as well, about our brothers and cousins, uncles and fathers who had gone, and not come home from Europe: France, Belgium; the South Pacific: Okinawa, Iwo Jima: Uncle Frank, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Buchanan, killed in France; his son, my cousin Dick, killed in the South Pacific; Uncle Jack, for whom I'm named, killed in Saipan.

On the way in from the airport yesterday, we stopped at the World War II Memorial on the Mall and I thought about them again: I thought about sacrifice, about laying your life on the line, about giving it all, giving everything you have to give.

At the end of the minute on Armistice Day the bands started up again, people resumed talking and laughing, and life went on.

That's the way it is, I suppose. There comes a moment, often without warning, a moment of challenge and demand, when something is required of you. 5'4" Police Sergeant Kimberly Munley at Fort Hood, jumping out of her car, running right at the shooter shooting at her, brining him down and saving many more lives. It happens on the battlefield. But it also happens on the athletic field, the board room and operating room, on the streets of the city, in offices, kitchens and churches; it happens deep in your heart. What is required now is your most authentic self: everything you are, and you can't really hold anything back: you either do it or you don't.

I wonder if the poor widow in the Gospel text this morning thought about it, planned ahead of time to give, all she had, her last two coins? Jesus and his friends are in the grand, impressive Temple in Jerusalem, the capital city, the symbol of h is people's historic aspirations and dreams, the heart of its religion. They have walked all the way down from Galilee, to observe the Passover. Things are going badly. Ever since all that fuss when he entered the city riding on a donkey and a crowd gathered to cheer him on, greeting him like some kind of conquering hero there had been simmering resentment, fear turning to hatred, and now talk of eliminating him. He alone seems to understand what is happening, that all he has and is may soon be required of him.

They're walking, strolling through one of the outer courts of the Temple. They sit down opposite the Temple Treasury: actually thirteen trumpet shaped copper receptacles, each supervised by a priest, where worshippers and visitors and tourists place an offering. It's a pretty good show actually. There is no paper currency, only coin. There is no "silent offering" - you can "hear" the offering - they're not nearly as discrete as Episcopalians, or Presbyterians. The receptacles are copper. Wealthy donors either dump a bag of coins in or open the bag and let it fall, the coins ricocheting, clattering. I'll bet that's what they did. I have a confession. I'd be tempted to do it.

I know I would because when the magazine my college sends to all its alums arrives, I turn to the back where all the contributors are listed in categories, based on amount, to see my name and how I'm doing in comparison with my classmates. Who doesn't do it? That's why it's in there. Another confession, when I settled into my seat at Symphony Center for a concert by the Chicago Symphony, before I read the program notes I turn to the back of the program and check out how the members of my congregation are doing, listed by category and size of gift.

So that's what Jesus and his disciples are doing and I think they're enjoying it. And here comes a poor widow and makes her way to the receptacle and drops in two coins - you know there are two because they clatter down to the bottom of the receptacle. It's not very much, pitiful actually - worth a penny, a coin so undervalued that we don't clutter our pockets with them anymore, leave them behind in the little dish by the cash register, don't lean over an pick one up from the sidewalk.

But it's all she has and Jesus says - her gift is what this is all about - she has put in everything she has: she has given it all and that, Jesus said, is what I have been trying to teach you and am about to show you.

Now if you are chairperson of the Capital Campaign, or the Development Director, this story is turning into a fundraising nightmare. Every gift counts, of course, but if you're going to make your goal, you have to have major gifts: this gets a little delicate for the church: we're not nearly as good at it as the museums, symphony orchestra, colleges. You have to have major or "lead" gifts and they have to be made publicly enough that they will encourage, inspire, stimulate and, if necessary, embarrass other capable givers. You simply have to have those who "contribute out of their abundance."

Everybody knows that. I think Jesus knows it, too. He came to the Temple to observe the rituals of Passover. He visited and taught in Synagogues. Institutions cost money. Someone is always trying to cast him in the mold of an opponent of institutional religion, suggesting that he would be, ipso facto, an opponent of church as institution, that something goes fundamentally wrong with the gospel when it becomes institutionalized. But you really can't do that. Eugene Peterson says that when people decide to follow Jesus he takes them to church: to synagogues on the Sabbath, to the Temple for Passover. He would certainly be a critic of the church, but like Robert Frost's quarrel with the world, Jesus' quarrel with the church would be a lover's quarrel.

My guess, based on nothing but observing where he in fact spent a lot of time, is that he walked up to the Temple Treasury and made his offering too.

In the final analysis, this is not about money alone; it's about True Religion, Authentic Religion, and for him it meant something like that widow giving all she had, something like an astonishing statement he made just a little time before, while they are still in Galilee: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it," something like Dietrich Bonhoeffer's haunting "When Christ calls a person, it is a call to come and die," which Bonhoeffer did.

At the heart of the Gospel is a radically counterintuitive idea - that you save your life, claim your life, fully live your life if you figure out a way to lose it, to give it away. It's a consistent theme in the story of Jesus. To a wealthy young man, a seeker for meaning - "Sell it all and follow me:" to disciples not quite sure who he is and what he wants of them: "save your life and lose it: lose your life for my sake and find it." And of course, this poor widow - now a powerful symbol of the whole story, an embodiment of his teaching and, furthermore an icon through which we see the mystery and reality of a self-giving God - she gave all she had. What she did, he is about to do. What she did is a picture of the reality of God.

Counterintuitive and countercultural: a culture that, over and over, every day of our lives from morning to night, in all the media: television, newspapers, magazines, in our mail, in the increasingly thick and glossy catalogs clogging our mailboxes and the U.S. Postal Service, on the Internet, on the sides of buses, billboards and in every shop window - the culture inundates us with a promise: "Buy this and you will be happy. Buy this and you will be alive." It has the evangelical power of religion.

There was an eye-catching ad in the Sunday *New York Times Magazine* a few weeks ago - an attractive young woman in tight white jeans with high boots, a leather jacket seductively open, leaning against a gleaming Harley Davidson motorcycle. It was the two words - believe me - that caught my attention: large white letters across the top of the full page ad that caught my eye - "TRUE RELIGION." What preacher could resist that? I wasn't sure whether it meant the girl or the motorcycle. Turns out it is the jeans. "True Religion" is a brand of pricey jeans from $175 to $500. Nice ad. But it's not true. It's a lie.

The social scientists observe that income increases don't seem to matter much. The doubling of affluence over the past half-century has not increased our happiness one iota.

Walter Brueggemann, in a recent book, *An Unsettling God*, says that the great lesson of the recent and current economic crisis that the Old Testament prophets were right: greed is lethal. Greed can kill - and almost did. The health and welfare of a society, and the contentment of its people, Walter says, is in what the Bible teaches in the care and security and health of its weakest, most vulnerable citizens. And, human health, welfare, wholeness, happiness, if you will, is a product of learning how to give your life away.

True Religion is not a pair of jeans, a stock portfolio. It's not what you own and consume. True Religion according to Jesus who we believe was the

Christ, the very essence and truth of God, True Religion is giving your life away: giving all you have.

In a superb little book, *The Writing Life*, which is about writing but also about living, Annie Dillard writes: “One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all: shoot it, play it, lose it all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book: give it: give it all: give it now. . . The impulse to save something for a better place later is the signal to spend it all. Something more will arise for later. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water.

“Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes” (p. 78-79).

It was a very great honor for Fourth Presbyterian Church and for me personally to host a memorial service this fall for recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor who died last year. There is an organization of Medal of Honor recipients. The truth is that many Medal of Honor recipients receive the award posthumously - Sgt. First Class Jared Monti, most recently, gave his life trying to rescue a wounded comrade in Afghanistan received the Medal of Honor on September 17. Survivors have a convention every year, and this year it was in Chicago. We were asked to host the memorial service, and of course, we were honored to do so. On the morning of September 18, buses full of old soldiers and sailors, Marines and their families, pulled up on busy Michigan Avenue in front of the church. There was a cohort of mounted Chicago Police. An Army Honor Guard fired a twenty-one-gun salute, and young Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine men and women, in full dress uniforms, were on hand to honor the fallen.

I welcomed everyone, gave the opening prayer, and then sat down to listen as the five men who had died in the past year were remembered. All were World War II combat veterans, each having performed incredible acts of heroism, courage, and unbelievable self-sacrifice on behalf of their comrades, their families and nation:

Russell Dunham, Kayserberg, France, January 8, 1945
Robert Nett, Philippine Islands, December 14, 1944
Everett Pope, Peleliu Island, September 19, 1944
James Swett, Solomon Islands, April 4, 1943
George Wahlen, Iwo Jima, March 3, 1945

In a moment of extreme danger, each of these men, then in their late teens and early twenties, reached deep within their own hearts and decided to risk life itself, to give everything any one of us has to give, for friends, family, nation.

It was a good and holy moment to be able to say thank you to God for them.

Not many of us will have to make that particular decision, thanks be to God. But every one of us does make that decision in one way or another - to give our lives, all we have -

- to live for the children—our own, or our nation's children, the world's children
- to give our life to a beloved who needs us
- to give life to a school, a college, a university, a church
- to give life to some great cause: education, health, justice, compassion, peace, that will make life more human and the world better
- to give life so that the most vulnerable will be cared for: the hungry fed, the naked clothed, the homeless sheltered

There is an invitation here - to a radical extravagance - to live your life fully, by giving it away, pouring it out with all the passion, energy, intelligence, imagination and love in you. To follow this one as he does just that, as he proceeds, with great intentionality and passion, to his cross, to give all he has.

"Look" Jesus said. "Look at her."

This is who I am.
This is what I mean.
This is what I mean for you to be.
This is how I will save your soul.

"Look" Jesus said. "Look at her - She gave all she had."

Thanks be to God.

Amen